The Little Fiddler of Amen Island

By NORMAN DUNCAN

Illustrations by George Harding

IT was the boast of the Little Fiddler of Amen Island that he had lamed many a man and maid. "An', ecod!" said he, his blue eyes alight, his clean little teeth showing in a mischievous grin, his round cheeks flushed with delight in the gift of power. "There's no leg between ol' Cape John an' the Norman Light so sodden it can balk me when I've the wind in my favor!"—meaning to imply, with more truth than modesty, that the devilishly alluring invitation of his music was altogether irresistible when he was in the mood to provoke a response. "Had I the will," said he, "I could draw tears from the figurehead o' the *Roustabout*. An' one o' these days, when I've the mind t' show my power," said he darkly, "maybe I'll do it, too!"

He was young—he was twelve. Terry Lute was his name. To be known as the Little Fiddler of Amen Island from Twillingate Long Point as far north as the Newfoundland world of that coast sailed was the measure of celebrity he coveted.

It was aboard a trading schooner—a fly-by-night visitor at Amen Island—that the Little Fiddler of Amen Island had first clapped eyes on a fiddle and heard the strains of it. That was long ago—oh, long, long ago! Terry Lute was a mere child then—seven or thereabouts. An' 'twas the month o' June—sweet weather, ecod! (said he) an' after dark an' the full o' the moon. And Terry had harkened to the strain—some plaintive imaginings of the melancholy clerk in the cabin, perhaps; and he had not been able to bear more—not another wail or sob of it (said he)—but had run full tilt to his mother's knee to tell her first of all the full wonder of the adventure. 'Twas called a fiddle (said he)—'twas played with what they called a bow; an' oh, woman (said he), what music could be made by means of it! And Terry could play it—he had seen the clerk sawin' an' sawin' away; an' he had learned how 'twas done jus' by lookin'—in a mere peep. 'Twas nothin' at all t' do (said he)—not a whit o' bother for a clever lad. Jus' give un a fiddle an' a bow—he'd show un how 'twas done!

"I got t' have one, mama!" he declared. "Oo-sh! I jus' got t'!"

His mother laughed at this fine fervor.

"Mark me!" he stormed. "I'll have one o' they fiddles afore very long. An' I'll have folk fair shakin' their legs off t' the music I makes!"

AT Candlestick Cove, Doctor Rolfe was to feed his dogs and put up for the night. It was treacherous March weather; and the night threatened foul—a flurry of snow falling and the sky overcast with a thickening drab scud. Day was done when Doctor Rolfe crawled out of the timber and scurried down Jump Hill. In the early dusk the lights were already twinkling yellow and warm in the cottages below. There were still sixty miles left of Doctor Rolfe's northern round—the second winter round from Afternoon Arm to the lonely huts of Laughter Bight, thirty miles north of Cape Blind. Doctor Rolfe visioned those wintry miles and reflected upon the propriety of omitting a call at Amen Island. He drew up at Mild Jim Cull's.

"Skipper James," said he, in the kitchen, across the lamp-lit, devastated supper-table, an hour later, "what's the health of Amen Island?"

"They're all well, sir—so far as I knows."

"All well? Just my luck! Then I won't—"

"Amanda," Skipper James admonished his wife in a grieved whisper, "the Doctor is wantin' another cup o' tea."

The good woman was astonished.

"He've had—" she began.

Then she blushed, and grasped the pot in a fluster, and—

"Thank you—no more," the Doctor protested.

"Ah, now, sir—"

"No more. Really, you know! I've quite finished. I—well—I—if you please, Mrs. Cull. Half a cup—no more. Thank you."

"ALL fit an' well, sir, as I says," Skipper James repeated, relieved—"so far as I knows."

"Anybody come across Ships' Run lately?"

"Well, no, sir—nobody but ol' Jack Hulk. Another slice o' pork, Doctor?"

The youngest little Cull tittered, astounded:

"He've had—"

Amanda covered the youngest little Cull's lips just in time with a soft hand.

"Thank you—no," the Doctor protested again. "I've quite finished. Nothing more—really! Well," he yielded, "if you will—"

"No; nobody but ol' Jack Hulk."

"Jack Hulk, you say? Hm-m. When was that?"

"I don't rightly remember, sir. 'Twas less than a fortnight ago; I'll lay t' that much."

"And all well over there?"

"No report o' sickness, sir."

"Quite sure about that?"

"Well, sir," Skipper James replied, his gray eyes twinkling, "I asked ol' Jack Hulk, an' he said, 'All well on Amen Island. The Lord's been wonderful easy on us this winter. I'd almost go so far as t' say,' says he, 'that he've been lax. We've had no visitation o' the Lord,' says he, 'since the fall o' the year. We don't deserve this mercy. I'm free t' say that. We isn't been livin' as we should. There's been more frivolity on Amen Island this winter than ever afore in my time. It haven't been noticed so far,' says he. 'That's plain enough. An' so, as yet,' says he, 'we're all well on Amen Island.'"

The Doctor grinned.

"What's the ice on Ships' Run?" said he.

"'Tis tumbled, sir. A man would have t' foot it across. You bound over, sir?"

Doctor Rolfe deliberated.

"I think not," said he, then. "No." This was positive. "If they're all as well as that on Amen Island, I'll get away for Afternoon Arm at noon to-morrow. No; no more—really. I—well—I'm almost wolfish, I declare. Thank you—if you please—just a sma-a-all—"

WHEN old Bob Likely, the mailman, traveling afoot, rounded Come-Along Point of Amen Island and searched the shadows ahead for his entertainment, his lodgings for the night were determined and disclosed. It was late—a flurry of snow falling and the moon overcast with a thickening drab scud; and old Bob Likely's disheartened expectation on the tumbled ice of Ships' Run, between Point o' Bay of the Harborless Shore and Amen Island, had consequently discovered the cottages of his destination dark—the windows black, the fires dead, the kitchens frosty, and the folk of Amen Island long ago turned in. Of the thirty cottages of Amen, however, snuggled under thick blankets of snow, all asleep in the gray night, one was wide awake—lighted up as if for some festivity; and for the hospitality of its lamps and smoking chimney old Bob Likely shaped his astonished course.

"'Tis a dance!" he reflected, heartening his step. "I'll shake a foot if I lame myself!"

Approaching Tom Lute's cottage from the harbor ice, old Bob Likely cocked his ear for the thump and shuffle of feet and the lively music of the Little Fiddler of Amen Island. It was the Little Fiddler's way to boast: "They'll sweat the night! Mark me! I'm feelin' fine. They'll shed their jackets! I'll have their boots off!" And old Bob Likely expected surely to discover the Little Fiddler perched on the back of a chair, the chair aloft on the kitchen table, mischievously delighting in the abandoned antics of the dancers. But there was no music—no thump or shuffle of feet or lively strain. The house was still—except for a whizz and metallic squeaking in the kitchen shed, to which old Bob Likely made his way.

Tom Lute was whirling a grindstone by candlelight in the shed. When Bob Likely lifted the latch he was startled.

"Who's that?" he demanded.

"'Tis his Majesty's mail, Tom."

"That you, Bob?" Tom's drawn face lightened with heartiness. "Well, well! Come in. You're welcome. We've need of a lusty man in this house the night. If the thing haves t' be done, Bob, you'll come handy for holdin'. You come across from Candlestick?"

Bob threw off his pack.

"No," said he; "I come over from Point o' Bay."

"Any word o' the Doctor down north?"

"Ay; he's down north somewheres."

"Whereabouts, Bob?"

"I heard of un at Trap Harbor."

"Trap Harbor! Was he workin' north?"

"There was sickness at Huddle Cove."

"At Huddle Cove? My, my! 'Tis below Cape Blind. He'll not be this way in a fortnight. Oh, dear me!"

By this time Bob was stamping his feet and brooming the snow from his seal-hide boots. In answer to his violence the kitchen door fell ajar. Bob Likely cocked his ear. Queer sounds—singular scraps of declaration and pleading—issued to the wood-shed. There was the tap-tap of a wooden leg. Bob Likely identified the presence and agitated pacing of the maternal grandfather of the Little Fiddler. And there was a whimper and a sob. It was the Little Fiddler. A woman crooned: "Hush, dear—ah, hush, now!" A high-pitched, querulous voice: "That's what we done when I sailed along o' Small Sam Small aboard the *Royal Bloodhound*. That's what we done t' Cap'n Small Sam Small." A young roar, then: "I'll never have it done t' me!" And the woman again: "Ah, hush, dear! Never mind! Ah—hush, now!" To which there responded a defiant bawl: "I tell you, I won't have it done t' me!"

BY all this, to be sure, old Bob Likely was deeply mystified.

"Look you, Tom!" said he suspiciously. "What you doin' out here in the frost?"

"Who? Me?" Tom was evasive.

"Ay."

"Nothin' much."

"'Tis a cold place for that, Tom. An' 'tis a poor lie you're tellin'. 'Tis easy t' see, Tom, that you're busy."

"Ah, well, I got a little job on hand."

"What is your job?"

"This here little job I'm doin' now?"

"Ay."

Tom was reluctant. "I'm puttin' an edge on my ax," he replied.

"What for, Tom?"

Tom hesitated. "Well—" he drawled. And then, abruptly: "Nothin' much." He was both grieved and agitated.

"But what *for?*"

"I wants it good an' sharp."